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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS LEAGUE OPTIMISTIC AMID SOME SIGNS OF PROGRESS

REF: A. TUNIS 985

- [¶](#)B. TUNIS 932
- [¶](#)C. TUNIS 770
- [¶](#)D. TUNIS 330

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (C) During a July 23 meeting, Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH) President Mokhtar Trifi told the Ambassador that the LTDH was open to any solution the GOT could offer to the League's crisis. The LTDH's only conditions would be the continued (political) independence of the League and its ability to continue its mandate. The Ambassador voiced the USG's support for independent Tunisian civil society, including the LTDH, and the need for increased freedom of expression and association in Tunisia. Trifi encouraged the USG to press the GOT for concrete political reforms. On July 24, the Ambassador told Foreign Minister Abdallah the LTDH must be allowed to conduct its regular activities. The Foreign Minister responded that President Ben Ali "wants an end" to the LTDH crisis. End Summary.

READY FOR A SOLUTION

[¶](#)2. (C) LTDH President Mokhtar Trifi began his July 23 meeting with the Ambassador by noting that 11 of the 14 LTDH regional offices in Tunisia are now closed -- either due to GOT pressure or one of the many lawsuits against the LTDH. However, Trifi noted that police presence around the LTDH Tunis headquarters had diminished in the days following his early July meeting with Moncer Rouissi, President of the GOT's Higher Commission on Human Rights and Civil Liberties (HCHR). Trifi said that, at Rouissi's suggestion, he had written President Ben Ali that the LTDH leadership is "ready to find a solution." He hoped the letter would have a positive effect. The LTDH had two conditions, however: 1) that the League must maintain its political independence, and 2) that the LTDH must be allowed to continue its efforts to defend human rights in Tunisia. Noting the limitations on civil society in Tunisia, Trifi explained that he hoped the League would be able to pursue what are considered "normal" activities for an independent Tunisian NGO. The LTDH will never be the type of Tunisian NGO that issues congratulatory messages to President Ben Ali. Trifi said that the LTDH is ready for dialogue with Rouissi and was pleased to have an interlocutor within the GOT. While cautioning that Rouissi is only a "facilitator," not a negotiator, Trifi remained optimistic a solution might be found.

LEGAL PROBLEMS "POLITICAL"

¶3. (C) Turning to the League's various court cases brought by RCD-loyal regional members (Ref A), Trifi called judicial decisions "a completely political process." He highlighted that there are 34 current cases against the LTDH, and, suspiciously, several of the plaintiffs happen to have the same attorney representing them. Nonetheless, Trifi said the LTDH leadership is prepared to meet with all LTDH members, including those who criticize the Executive Committee, to find a solution. However, he clarified that the LTDH is a centralized organization, and the Executive Committee creates and oversees regional operations. Therefore, Trifi said, individual LTDH members cannot create a regional office of one, as some had tried to do.

¶4. (C) Trifi told the Ambassador that despite the limitations on its activities, LTDH members number approximately 3,000. But a solution was needed to convince the regional chapters to remain active. The closure of regional offices had led many to meet in coffee shops and residences. Yet, many members remain loyal and continue to pay dues to rent offices which cannot be used due to GOT police presence.

GOT LIMITATIONS AND USG SUPPORT

¶5. (C) Trifi lamented the GOT's tendency to delay the resolution of small issues before they became problems. Solutions exist, but the GOT too often can't or won't make a decision, said Trifi. He cited the recent Bar Association elections (Ref B) as an example of this, explaining that

GOT-loyal lawyers who were elected in the past had been unable to deliver results for the Bar Association. Therefore, the Bar membership -- including members of the ruling RCD party -- had elected independent leaders. Trifi said the GOT, in its efforts to control everyone, marginalizes the moderate center and thus pushes people to extremism. Another example of this, said Trifi, is the recent arrests of scores of young people who have been accused of terrorism. Putting "innocents" in prison with real extremists risks turning them into fanatics who will exit prison one day as suicide bombers, warned Trifi, who is an attorney.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador pointed to President Bush's Prague speech as an example of the USG's continued support for freedom and human rights in the Middle East. He emphasized ongoing US support for Tunisian civil society and democracy, as well as freedom of expression and association. Like other civil society leaders, Trifi told the Ambassador that the US image in the region has been tarnished by the problems in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Yet he admitted that the United States is viewed as a friend to Tunisia and democracy and recommended the USG demand concrete steps from the GOT -- not only rhetoric -- in favor of freedom of expression, association and assembly. Allowing moderate civil society actors to speak and be heard, said Trifi, is the only way to combat extremism, particularly among Tunisian youth.

FM: BEN ALI WANTS LTDH SOLUTION

¶7. (C) During a July 24 meeting with Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah, the Ambassador encouraged the GOT to undertake greater political reforms (Ref A), including solving the LTDH crisis. The FM said the LTDH leadership must do more to find a solution, and argued that only they benefited from the current situation and the international exposure it brings. Noting that the LTDH is well-known to international NGOs, Abdallah added that Tunisia is "always

criticized" for the League's problems. Abdallah said that HCHR President Rouissi is trying to find a solution to the problem quickly, as President Ben Ali "wants an end" to the problem. Abdallah closed by saying that clearly the two sides must be involved in any negotiation.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) After the case of the recently released activist Mohamed Abbou, the LTDH crisis has probably attracted the most negative attention to the human rights situation in Tunisia. If HCHR President Rouissi is able to find a solution to the League's problems, as he has done with several other recent cases, it may be fair to conclude that Ben Ali and others in the GOT have truly set out to improve the political and human rights situation. Trifi and others in Tunisian civil society are the most optimistic we have seen them recently about the prospects for change. The Embassy will continue its efforts on all fronts to encourage such a shift by the GOT. End Comment.

GODEC